

## EXERCISE BOOBY VII RECCE REPORT

### (VISIT TO ASCENSION ISLAND BY LT COL RC DICKEY 18/19 JAN 00)

#### BACKGROUND

1. The Army Ornithological Society (AOS) has conducted five expeditions over the last decade with the primary purpose of determining the breeding population of Sooty Terns *Sterna fuscata* on Ascension Island. All data has been forwarded to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) as part of an ongoing study of feral cat predation on the Sooty Tern colonies and the production of a conservation plan for the island.
2. The expeditions are conducted approximately every 18 months and last on average for two weeks. Membership includes civilian ornithologists, AOS and Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) members and an adventure training instructor. An expedition should have been launched to coincide with a predicted first hatching on 11 Jan 00 but this had to be postponed. Considering the long period (two breeding seasons) since the last firm breeding data, there was a requirement to ascertain the status of the Sooty Tern colonies in Jan 00 or risk missing the best time for conducting density counts later in the year.

#### AIM

3. The aim of the recce was to ascertain the status of the Sooty Tern breeding colonies, by observation and by photography, in order to determine the optimum expedition dates for Nov/Dec 00.

#### FAIRS

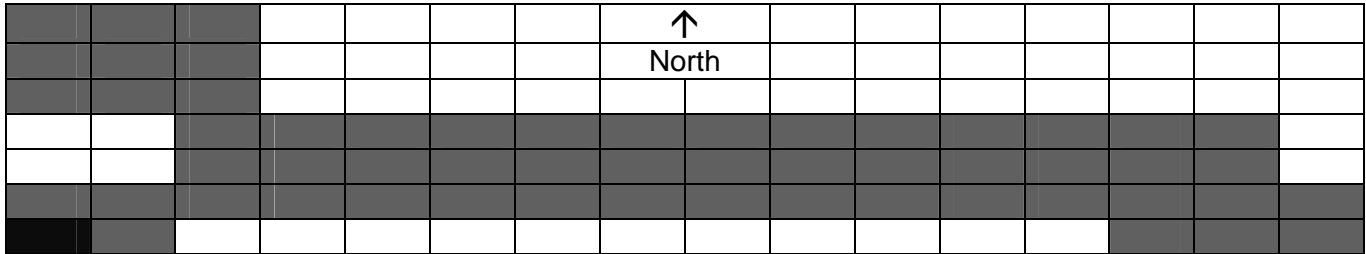
4. Three traditional breeding areas were visited; Mars Bay Grid 660171, Sandy Run East Grid 685176 and the Waterside Fairs centred on Grid 697173.
  - a. Mars Bay. Mars Bay was visited on 18 and 19 Jan. The colony was only 15% the size of a normal season, split into two adjacent sub-colonies approximately 25x20m each and situated close to the shoreline, on a previously visited fair. There was no sign of prospecting on any of the more northerly fairs.
  - b. Sandy Run. The area east of Sandy Run was checked thoroughly on 18 Jan and to the west checked by observation. There were no colonies nor any sign of prospecting.
  - c. Waterside Fairs. On 18 and 19 Jan, Sooty Terns occupied only 40% of the traditional fairs area in an east/west 'bonio' shape, with the bottom of the fair along the sea cliff edge. There were no sub-colonies, less being split by crags or large rock formations and the centre of the fair covered the flat sandy area 50 -100m from the shoreline.
5. There was evidence (new cairns/yellow tape) of a survey having been conducted on all fairs after the last AOS visit in Jun 98 (Apr 99?), suggesting a normal to large colony distribution.

#### BREEDING STATUS

6. The breeding season for sooty terns has always been known to comprise four phases; nightclubbing, prospecting, incubating and chick rearing. As three of these phases can be running concurrently, though on different fairs, expeditions with the primary aim of establishing densities, have always attempted to arrive between 40 and 60 days after the first eggs of the season have been laid.

- a. Mars Bay. Both sub-colonies had eggs which local interest had stated were first laid on 15 Jan. The southerly sub-colony were more established and less flighty but had 20% of birds still prospecting/about to lay. The northerly sub-colony had up to 30% of birds without eggs, were very flighty and prospecting on the north edge of the colony was very evident.
- b. Waterside. On 18 Jan, there was no evidence of chicks on the west side of the fair including a sub-colony in the south-west corner of the fair, on the cliff top. On 19 Jan, a full status survey was conducted of the entire fair. The table below shows approximate status.

### Waterside Fairs



No Birds     
  Prospecting     
  With Eggs     
  Chicks

Prospecting birds were particularly numerous on the north side of the fair with the majority of birds in pairs, still copulating and easily disturbed. Birds with eggs populated the flattest and sandy, central part of the fairs although spreading into the rocks on all sides. Nest density was higher than previously seen although this could not be measured. The first chicks were hatched at approximately 1000 hrs on 19 Jan, in the area marked; a slightly lower sub-colony against the cliff top. Although only 4 chicks were fully emerged and dry, all surrounding eggs showed signs of imminent hatching.

### 7. Comment.

- a. The Waterside Fair is considerably more advanced than Mars Bay. From evidence, the Waterside Fairs were occupied from south-west to north-east but lack of further suitable nesting areas suggests birds will occupy northerly extensions to the current site or establish new colonies within the fairs area.
- b. Mars Bay was one sixth the size of previous colonies in the area and without an increase in numbers, is unlikely to be large enough to sustain itself until the end of the breeding season. Mars bay in particular will need to be monitored throughout the 9Urrt season, with the minimum of disturbance (further comment below).
- c. The Mars Bay Fair is approximately 24- 28 days behind the Waterside Fairs. The first hatchings are to be expected on 9 Feb if the date of first laying is accurate.
- d. An 'on ground' count of all Sooty Terns in both fairs, (also accounting for prospecting in pairs), totalled approximately 90,000 breeding pairs. The total for Jun 98 was 207,000 breeding pairs.
- e. The first hatching of the current breeding season was due on 11 Jan 00, working on the 295 day cycle over two breeding seasons. Taking the 19 Jan 00 datum point, the first hatchings of the next breeding season is expected to be on 8 Nov 00.

## **DISTURBANCE/PREDATION**

8. Human. There is considerable evidence of human disturbance to the Mars Bay Sooty Tern Fair. Vehicle access is now easy and there was evidence that 4x4/trucks had been down to the area of the colony within the last four days (since the last rain). The issue was brought to the attention of the Administrator. Recent bottle parties had taken place on the sandy gully floor, in one case, within 10 yards of the colony. While the area naturally attracts 'picnickers', Sooty Terns will not tolerate too much disturbance, particularly in the early part of the season and the disappearance of the Mars Bay Fair will put further pressure on the birds on Waterside.
9. Feral Cats. Feral cat kills from the current season were evident in large numbers around all the fairs. Three fresh corpses found on Sandy Run East suggests predation during a potential nightclubbing/prospecting phase in the area. Several fresh scats were also found in this and other areas. Approximately six 'pantries' were found on Waterside, all containing 6-9 new corpses. Three pantries were found on Mars Bay with evidence (trail) of birds being taken to individual eating sites on the clinker wall. This is probably food being taken to a cat's litter, coinciding with the end of the rainy season. Should the numbers of Sooty Terns increase and the colonies expand to the size of previous years, the colonies will suffer but continue to produce juveniles. If there is no further increase, Mars Bay will be depleted at an irrecoverable rate and Waterside is unlikely to produce more than 25% of the numbers of young of previous seasons.
10. Frigate Birds *Fregata aquila*. Five Frigate Birds (males, females and juveniles) were seen over Waterside Fairs on 18 and 19 Jan but the only interference noticed was in trying to intercept Sooty Terns returning from the sea in order to make them disgorge their food.
11. Indian Mynah *Acridotheres tristis*. Two pairs of Mynahs were seen around both Mars Bay and Waterside Fairs. Only one Sooty Tern egg was seen to have been attacked by Mynahs - in the hatching sub-colony.
12. Sheep. It was with concern that sheep were noticed in the proximity of both fairs. Sheep trails lead down to and across the Waterside Fairs and although seen on previous visits, numbers of sheep appear to have increased considerably. This is presumably in correlation with the spread of Mexican Thorn, providing increased food and shelter.

## **REPRESENTATION**

13. A visit was made to the Administrator, HH Mr Geoffrey Fairhurst, to discuss the purpose of AOS expeditions, the Ascension Island Management Plan and in particular, the state of the feral cat eradication programme. The damage inflicted by feral cats on the Sooty Tern population of Ascension Island is well proven in the Plan but there is urgent need to follow this written appreciation of the problem, with action. The AOS will continue to support the Island's conservation programme, through the RSPB, as it has done over the last decade. It was particularly encouraging to hear the Administrator's strong commitment to the programme.
14. The subject of the next AOS expedition was also discussed with the Officer Commanding RAF Ascension Island, Sqn Ldr Colin Menage RAF. The basic requirements of the expedition were explained and he is supportive of any assistance that can be given to conservation on the island. Subject to MOD approval of the expedition, he will welcome the expedition later in the year.
15. The visit coincided with a long term breeding turtle study (Darwin Initiative) on the island and it is hoped that some limited follow up action can take place to keep the AOS informed of progress in Mars Bay. Prior to the next breeding season, it will be necessary to have contacts on Ascension Island in order to fine tune the arrival date of the expedition.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

16. The recce achieved its aim by taking place at the same time as the first Sooty Tern hatchings of the season. Based on the 295 day breeding cycle, it is recommended that the next AOS expedition to Ascension Island takes place between 14 and 25 Nov 00, subject to the normal contingencies.

23 Jan 00

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